CHAPTER III

STRAFFORD

IT WAS TO BE EXPECTED THAT A POET WITH A marked gift for dramatic writing should turn to drama for the stage. In late 1835 Browning met the great Victorian actor-manager William Charles Macready, and they seemed to hit it off right away. When in 1836 the poet proposed a drama about Strafford, Macready leaped at the idea. During the autumn of 1836 and the winter of 1837, Browning worked on the project, revising it to meet many objections on the part of the actor, who grew increasingly fearful that the play would fail. Macready delayed production, "convinced that the play must be utterly condemned," and the author was so disheartened that he almost withdrew it. Strafford was, however, finally performed on 1 May 1837 and printed on the same day, the only one of his early volumes to appear at the expense of the publisher. It had a run of five performances.

It is not surprising that Macready or his audiences did not care for the play. For both were accustomed to a quite different kind of drama. Macready was worried chiefly by "the meanness of plot" and the lack of "dramatic power; character having the [supposed] interest of action." The audience likewise was perturbed by the lack of action. William Bell Scott's response to the play was typical:

My admiration for Paracelsus was so great I determined to go and to applaud [the first performance of Strafford], without rhyme or reason; and so I did, in the front of the pit. From the first scene it became plain that applause was not the order. The speakers had every one of them orations to deliver, and no action of any kind to perform. The scene changed, another door opened, and another half-dozen gentlemen entered as long-winded as the last.3

Browning, however, was not interested in presenting the kind of action that his producer and audience expected. He was concerned with the development of the soul, with charac-
ter—but not with character as an agent of plot. Already in *Paracelsus* he had aimed, as he said in the foreword, to focus on "the mood itself in its rise and progress" and to subordinate "the agency by which it is influenced and determined." Now, in writing a drama for the stage, he was again trying to show, as the preface relates, "Action in Character, rather than Character in Action"; which is to say, he was attempting a dramatic form that would retain the detachment and objectivity of drama yet that would also allow for the subjective action of the lyric. As Terry Otten says, Browning was seeking "to break down the barriers between lyric and dramatic form and discover a means of giving subjective matter objective expression." In short, Browning wished to write ironic drama, a drama that originates in the incongruity of the reflexive activity of the self observed and observing.

In his two previous works, Browning had investigated the local ironies of soul-making, the self in its development. The completion of *Paracelsus*, with its enunciation of the doctrine of becoming in scene five, provided Browning with a philosophical basis for his irony that permitted him to enlarge his conception of it. For once the poet accepted the idea that being is also becoming—that *a* is both *a* and not *a*—then the way was opened to the kind of irony that is to be seen not so much as a form of irony but as a way of presenting it—what one theorist calls "really the dramatization of irony." Although the implications of such an ironic view had been set down by Friedrich Schlegel, it was an Englishman, who, borrowing from Hegel, most probably delineated for the young Browning the dramatic possibilities of irony as a cosmic view. Writing on the irony of Sophocles in 1833, Connop Thirlwall observed that in the *Antigone*, Sophocles impartially presented two equal and opposite points of view and, expanding on this, remarked that irony may reside in the attitude of an ironic observer or, more precisely, in the situation observed:

There is always a slight cast of irony in the grave, calm, respectful attention impartially bestowed by an intelligent judge on two contending parties, who are pleading their causes before him with all the earnestness of deep conviction, and of excited feeling. What makes the contrast interesting is, that the right and the truth lie on
neither side exclusively: that there is no fraudulent purpose, no gross imbecility of intellect, on either: but both have plausible claims and specious reasons to allege, though each is too much blinded by prejudice or passion to do justice to the views of his adversary. For here the irony lies not in the demeanor of the judge, but is deeply seated in the case itself, which seems to favour each of the litigants, but really eludes them both.

The most interesting debates or conflicts are not, Thirlwall writes, those in which evil is pitted against good. For this case... seems to carry its own final decision in itself. But the liveliest interest arises when by inevitable circumstances, characters, motives, and principles are brought into hostile collision, in which good and evil are so inextricably blended on each side, that we are compelled to give an equal share of our sympathy to each, while we perceive that no earthly power can reconcile them; that the strife must last until it is extinguished with at least one of the parties, and yet that this cannot happen without the sacrifice of something which we should wish to preserve.7

It was with such ironic possibilities in mind, whether gained from Thirlwall or not, that Browning sat down to write Strafford—"to freshen a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch," as he said in the preface to the play. Hence Strafford is important not only because it helps us chart Robert Browning's development but also because it may well be the first play in English consciously designed as a dramatization of irony.

Once we understand the ironic intent of the play, even surface ironies become almost immediately apparent. The characters are far from being "the healthy natures" of whom Browning spoke in the preface. At best Strafford and Pym are, like Paracelsus, monomaniacs. They are devoted, against all reason, to the furtherance of an idea—to the monarchial principle in the case of Strafford, to the parliamentary in the case of Pym. Yet if we investigate further, we find that what drives them, as well as Lady Carlisle, is not principle but love, in all three cases love frustrated.8

Postponing consideration of Carlisle for the moment, let us turn our attention to Strafford and Pym. In earlier life they had been friends who shared a dedication to the rights of Par-
liament; even now Strafford is susceptible to Pym’s plea to return to his old friends. Yet somehow the King manages to captivate him, to seduce him away from his former friends. For even though he is fully cognizant of the King’s waywardness and personal disloyalty, when Charles calls him “my Friend / of Friends” (1.2.241-42) Strafford vows, “I am yours—/Yours ever../To the death, yours” (2.2.36-38). Hereafter, with the one brief exception in 3.3, in spite of every act of perfidy and disloyalty on Charles’ part, Strafford remains utterly faithful to the King. Why? Because besottedly, like a romantic lover, he adores Charles, not the king but the man—“The man with the mild voice and mournful eyes” (2.2.292-93). It is this love that results in his death.

In the case of Pym there is a contrary movement. Where Strafford casts off notions of office in manifesting his love for the person, Pym puts aside the notion of love and friendship to serve the office. Pym declares continuing love for Wentworth (as he was known before becoming Earl of Strafford) in 1.1 and expresses hope that their former friendship might continue. In 1.2 Pym pleads with him to return to their old friendly ways and seems almost to succeed until the King appears and Wentworth lets Pym’s hand drop. Though there is some expression of rekindled hope in 2.1, Pym increasingly sees that Strafford (as Wentworth has now become) devotes himself exclusively to Charles. Hereafter Pym, like a scorned lover, becomes in his own eyes “the chosen man that should destroy / This Strafford” (4.2.159-60) and the embodiment of the will of England who seeks “England’s great revenge” (3.1.29). Only at the last “meeting,” about which they have frequently talked and where their paths irrevocably diverge, does Pym speak again of his love for the doomed man: “I never loved but this man—David not / More Jonathan! Even thus, I love him now” (5.2.287-88).

The dialectical movement of the antagonists shows that, in Thirlwall’s words, “both have plausible claims and specious reasons to alledge, though each is too blinded by prejudice or passion to do justice to the views of his adversary.” Both Strafford and Pym are led by belief in their causes to condone methods and actions of which they would otherwise disap-
prove. Strafford is loyal to a person whom he knows to be worthless and pursues a cause and courses of action that he knows to be futile. Pym places his faith in Strafford despite his former friend's known opposition to the parliamentary cause, and when it becomes plain that Strafford will support the king under all circumstances, he resorts to acts in total violation of parliamentary principles, including connivance with the king and collusion with the king's party. This means that the audience is faced with the paradox that the better man represents the worse cause.

The queen and courtiers are presented as pursuing their own self-interests, with no regard for the country at all. The parliamentarians, on the other hand, are shown in shifting attitudes. In the beginning they charge all the monarch's villainies to Strafford, although it is he who tries to mitigate the king's disgraceful actions with reference to Parliament. Vane, Rudyard, and Fiennes are the hotheads who wish to hound Wentworth from office, while Pym and Hampden advocate calm in consideration of a position to be taken with respect to Wentworth. In a reversal occurring in 4.2, Vane, Rudyard, and Fiennes become the moderates insisting upon fair treatment of Strafford, as Pym and Rudyard, pressing for a bill of attainder, declare, "We must make occasion serve" (173). The play leaves us in no doubt of the moral superiority of the parliamentary faction, even though it has a demagogue for its leader.

The dialectical movement of the antagonists in addition provides an ironic structure for the play much like that of Paracelsus, in which true aspiration leading to false attainment is followed by the reverse pattern. From the second act on, it is inevitable that the diverging paths of Pym and Strafford must cross again. "Keep tryst! the old appointment's made anew," says Pym. "Forget not we shall meet again!" And Strafford replies, "Pym, we shall meet again!" (2. 2. 154–55, 166). In act three Strafford submits to his antagonist as the embodiment of the will of England (3. 3. 96–97). But this proves not the true meeting, for Strafford discovers that he was "fool enough / To see the will of England in Pym's will" (4. 2. 74–75). He impeaches Pym, and far from there being a meeting of the two, the occasion is one in which Pym shrinks from, and
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quails before, Strafford (4. 2. 50, 59). To the parliamentarians, who demand that Pym bear Parliament's pardon to Strafford, Pym says: "Meet him? Strafford?/Have we to meet once more, then?" (4. 2. 186–87). And Strafford says in similar vein: "I would not look upon Pym's face again" (4. 2. 106).

Up to this point there has been an ironic reversal. Pym, the just man with a just cause, has grown in attitude and behavior to resemble the royalists, whose cause he detests and whose conduct he abominates—all because of his hate for Strafford. Even the king recognizes Pym's motives: "You think/Because you hate the Earl... (turn not away/We know you hate him)" (4. 3. 38–40). Strafford, on the other hand, grows in strength and dignity. Where in act one he was willing to perform any kind of deed for the sake of the king, no matter how much it offended conscience or common sense, in act four he marshals his energies for more apparently reasonable ends, even though on the king's behalf: "From this day begins/A new life, founded on a new belief/In Charles" (4. 2. 101–3). Strafford for the first time becomes in the eyes of the audience a partially sympathetic character in spite of the fact that his cause is shown to be less and less worthy and he himself a dupe. "We have all used that man," the king points out,

As though he had been ours..with not a source
Of happy thoughts except in us..and yet
Strafford has children, and a home as well,
Just as if we have never been!

(4. 3. 44–47)

For the first time we learn that Strafford has a family and that Pym is, as the king says, "a solitary man/Wed to your cause—to England if you will!" (4. 3. 48–49). The claims of "family" will assert themselves in the last act.

Strafford's new life falsely founded on a new belief in the king leads only to the Tower. It is no doubt an intended comment on the two antagonists that Strafford is shown with his son and daughter whereas Pym's "England" is depicted as "a green and putrefying charnel" (5. 2. 325) devouring children. And it is this England to whom Pym would immediately
“render up my charge” (5. 2. 280). For although this is the inevitable encounter, it is not to be the anticipated meeting. Pym foresees that he is to die soon after Strafford, and both agree that the tryst so long awaited will be better postponed till heaven (5. 2. 291–310). Yet at the end, when he thinks of Charles’ fate at Pym’s hands, Strafford begs that the king be spared: “No—not for England, now—not for Heaven, now . / This is the meeting....I’ll love you well!” But Pym is relentless, and all the love sought from Strafford he now forgoes: “England—I am thine own!” Strafford’s final line—“O God, I shall die first”—is full of ambiguities: after him will follow not only the king and Pym but also thousands of Englishmen killed in the Civil Wars. History—our knowledge of it, at any rate—forestalls closure.

Almost certainly the conflict between Pym and Strafford was the germ of the play: which is to say, the play was conceived as an ironic drama of character. It is of this, no doubt, that Browning speaks when he refers to Strafford as a play of “Action in Character, rather than Character in Action.” Yet in Strafford, as in Paracelsus, the poet was not content to allow an undefined irony of movement and countermovement. He attempted to provide a stable center for his drama not only by reference to history—that is, to our historical knowledge of the outcome of the conflict between the two protagonists—but also by his injection of Lady Carlisle into the midst of the dialectical movement: like Festus in Paracelsus she would be the stable center from which meaning would derive. Pym and Strafford were the historical données: the portraits of them are, Browning said in the preface, “faithful.” “My Carlisle, however, is purely imaginary.” Why is this so? Because the dramatist initially conceived of his play as a struggle between, in Thirlwall’s words, “two contending parties” in which “the right and the truth lie on neither side exclusively.” Then came the afterthought that the play perhaps needed not only a conventional romantic interest but also a moral center. If everyone in the play was to be fickle, self-serving, or blindly deceived, at least in Lady Carlisle there would be one “good” character who was faithful, selfless, and aware of the deceptions about her. What results, alas, is an incredible character.
Carlisle's love for Strafford is both selfless and hopeless. She loves a man who does not love her but instead loves another—the king. And she constantly hides from him all evidence of the king's duplicity so as to assure his love for Charles: "One must not lure him from a love like that! / Oh, let him love the King and die!" (2.2.243–44). To the last scene she keeps up this deception, pretending that it is the king and not she who plans Strafford's escape from the Tower. She speaks no more after Pym is discovered at the door of the prison, so that the last ninety-three lines are devoted to dialogue between the two antagonists, a fact that alone suggests her lack of centrality to the action of the play.

It is only by linking her to the major ironic theme of the play—deception—that Browning escapes making her totally extraneous. More than the other characters, she is aware of the discrepancy between things as they are and things as they seem. With her various pretenses concerning the king, Carlisle is conscious of playing a role. Indeed, she regards herself and others as actors in a play, a notion that, as we shall see, the other characters share. This self-consciousness on the part of the *dramatis personae* means that they become ironic observers and, as well, victims of irony to the extent that they doubt the meaningfulness of their actions in the drama.

At the beginning the Puritans fancy that Wentworth has turned Ireland "to a private stage" (1.1.41), has superseded other royalists "whose part is played" (1.1.151) and has tried to persuade Pym that "a patriot could not play a purer part / Than follow in his track" (1.1.115–16, as the passage reads in the 1863 revision). Strafford does indeed play a role, but not the one the Puritans envision. He perceives that the king wears a mask (2.2.123) to hide his real self and that in order to save the monarchy he too must do likewise. Thus when members of the parliamentary party arrive just at the moment that Strafford discovers the king's double dealings, Strafford immediately drops to his knee before Charles in a gesture of hurried but loyal farewell. As Lady Carlisle says, "there's a masque on foot" (2.2.260).

In this play within a play, conspirators teach their henchmen to recite to others "all we set down" with "not a word
missed” and “just as we drilled” (3.8, 21). Strafford is to be kept “in play,” ignorant of the real circumstances (3.2.126). As in a theater the king and his party witness the impeachment proceedings against Strafford from a screened box, which “admits of such a partial glimpse” and whose “close curtain / Must hide so much” (4.1.17–26). Their judgment of the trial is that is “was amusing in its way / Only too much of it...the Earl withdrew / In time!” (5.1.17–19). At the end Strafford wonders whether history will declare the chief part in this masque to have been played by an actor named “the Patriot Pym, or the Apostate Strafford” (5.2.57).

The characters’ sense of being observers and victims in a play is underscored by their reiterated belief that they are but puppets pulled by a master puppeteer. Pym and the Presbyterians feel, as good Calvinists should, that their actions are predestined. More than once Pym speaks of his fated course and of himself as “the chosen man” (4.2.159). Yet the royalists too also ascribe their actions to fate. Strafford says, “There’s fate in it—I give all here quite up” (2.2.195). And the king feels, “I am in a net.. / I cannot move!” (4.3.82–83). But of course there is really no question of the irony of fate at all: there is only the irony of falsely believing oneself trapped by a fateful irony: in actuality the characters are free to do as they choose.10

The actors in the masque are also very much aware of the superfluity of words enveloping the action. The opening scene, for example, is devoted to those who “will speak out” (36) and those who say there has been “talk enough” (263). The Puritan who appears and reappears like a character in Hellzapoppin is forever quoting Scripture. What is needed is that “word grow deed” (243). The next scene shows Wentworth discovering the machinations of the royalist party, who have “decried” his service (53) without ever uttering a “precise charge” (39) because they “eschew plain-speaking” (141). Wentworth believes that “one decisive word” on his part will put matters straight; surely the king “mistrusts their prattle” (146). Pym argues however that even though Wentworth’s letters to Charles “were the movingest” (159) and that the messages from the Scots were “words moving in their way,” Wentworth
can be sure that the king pays no attention to the words of either (162–63).

Act two again presents parallel scenes. The first shows the parliamentarians once more awash in a welter of words and divided in aim, until Pym brings news that Strafford will now be forced to take their part. Scene two shows Strafford reproaching the king for his duplicity but finally consenting to serve Charles in a new way. Lady Carlisle tries to convince Strafford that his enemies at court will again seduce the king, but Strafford does not want to hear: “In no case tell me what they do!” Having warned him, Carlisle will be silent and allow Strafford to continue in his illusion.

In the remaining acts Strafford is impeached on trumped-up charges, to which he responds with countercharges. When the trial threatens to expose the machinations of the Puritans, Pym brings in a bill of attainder, which even his followers recognize as a “hideous mass / Of half-borne out assertions—dubious hints / . distorions—aye, / And wild inventions” (4.2.129–32). Never denying this, Pym justifies himself by claiming that “the great word went from England to my soul” (4.3.99). In his last moments Strafford, wanting “to hear the sound of my own tongue” (5.2.83), begs Pym to spare the king, while Pym waits to hear “if England shall declare her will to me” (5.2.353).

The characters not only see themselves as actors in a play whose words alone convey the action but also regard themselves and their circumstances as part of a text to be interpreted. The parliamentary party are ever reading, or about to read, reports. Pym charges the king with attempting “to turn the record’s last and bloody leaf” so as to record a new “entry” on a “new page” (1.1.153–59). Strafford conceives of himself as a figure in a romance in which “we shall die gloriously—as the book says” (2.2.169–81). The text of every proposal is carefully scrutinized by both Puritans and royalists. It is a set of notes that seals Strafford’s fate (4.1.65). Only time and fame, “the busy scribe,” will provide the “curious glosses, subtle notices, / Ingenious clearings-up one fain would see” (5.2.52–55).

Because words are only signs and not the thing itself,
because men use words to rationalize their actions, the text that is life and living can never be interpreted in a wholly satisfactory way. One speaks truly only when one has nothing to hide, from oneself as well as from others. In the phenomenal world this never happens. Language remains a deceptive veil through which it is impossible fully to penetrate.

Yet though deceptive, language is the means by which the characters realize themselves—that is, advance themselves in soul-making. In this play, far more clearly then in *Pauline* or *Paracelsus*, Browning represents language itself, speech, as an activity—as the active, formative force of the mind in the process of self-articulation. Full of asides, interjections, half-completed statements, interruptions, the dialogue is characterized by numerous semantic breaks that offer possibilities for extension of meaning. Let us take for example the following colloquy between Strafford and Lady Carlisle near the end of act two, when Strafford has just discovered the full selfishness and faithlessness of the king and Carlisle realizes the extent of his foolish love for Charles:

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CARLISLE. The King!—
What way to save him from the King?
My soul..
That lent from its own store the charmed disguise
That clothes the King..he shall behold my soul!
Strafford...(I shall speak best if you’ll not gaze
Upon me.)...You would perish, too! So sure!...
Could you but know what ’tis to bear, my Strafford,
One Image stamped within you, turning blank
The else imperial brilliance of your mind,—
A weakness, but most precious,—like a flaw
I’ the diamond which should shape forth some sweet face
Yet to create, and meanwhile treasured there
Lest Nature lose her gracious thought for ever!...

STRAFFORD. When could it be?...no!...yet...
was it the day
We waited in the anteroom, till Holland
Should leave the presence-chamber?

CARLISLE. What?

STRAFFORD. —That I
Described to you my love for Charles?

CARLISLE. (Aside.) Ah, no—
One must not lure him from a love like that?
Oh, let him love the King and die! 'Tis past....
I shall not serve him worse for that one brief
And passionate hope...silent for ever now!

(2. 2. 225-46)

This staccato conversation reveals the degree of repression that enables each character to progress until he becomes "the Apostate Strafford" and she the selfless, untelling lover. Strafford seems to know what she is getting at, but then with that resolute "no!" he returns to the king, while she with her "What?" delays understanding him until she decides to say as an aside what evidently she was about to declare to him openly.

The dramatic irony here is easily discernible. A higher irony, however, resides in the fact that such exchanges, which are the building-blocks of the drama of "Action in Character," do not produce dialogue. As Browning here conceives language, it is not only an instrument of soul-making but, as we have seen, a means of deception, of oneself or others. Strafford might well have as its motto Paracelsus' statement "We live and breathe deceiving and deceived" (4. 625).

Though there is much to admire about Strafford, I find it difficult to like as a play. First, the dialogue is often stiff or florid. And even when most interesting, as in the passage just discussed, the semantic gaps and blank linguistic moments, which become part of the meaning of the play, are not appropriate to "the healthy natures of a grand epoch." Only modern subject matter can accommodate such modern dramatic use of language. Even Beckett and Pinter would find it near impossible to apply their techniques to a tragedy about the Civil Wars. Second, there is no character who can serve as a pole of sympathy to pull the audience into the action. It might be objected that this is the whole point, that it is a play without a
hero. But even were this to be granted, there would still be something additional to say: that any such work must have characters of sufficient interest in themselves to offset their villainies, imbecilities, or insipidities. And this is not true of Strafford or Pym or Lady Carlisle, all of whom remain pretty much what they were at the beginning. If there is tragedy in this “Historical Tragedy” (as Browning subtitled it), it is the tragedy of the people of England, who are made to suffer from the conflict of wills between the royalists and the parliamentarians, which, but for Strafford and Pym as they are here represented, might have been averted. But this is the tragedy of history and not of the play Strafford.